

University of Groningen

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Published in:
Les Grandes Figures historiques dans les lettres et les arts

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Renders, H. (2017). 'Biography as a correction to history'. *Les Grandes Figures historiques dans les lettres et les arts*, 2017(2), 31-37.

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Les Grandes Figures
historiques dans les Lettres
et les Arts

hors-série n°2 2017

ISSN 2261-0871

Great Biographers 2

articles réunis par Joanny Moulin
et Hans Renders

édition Alison Boulanger
Fiona McIntosh Varjabedian

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Biography as a Correction to History

Nigel Hamilton became one of the world's best-known biographers for a book he never wrote. In 1992, *JFK: Reckless Youth* appeared, the first volume of what was to be a complete biography of John F. Kennedy. A subsequent volume never appeared, despite the fact that the reception of this revealing first volume was overwhelming and positive, particularly after its inclusion on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The work on Roosevelt that Hamilton is now engaged in (the third volume of his *FDR at War* trilogy) only makes the story of the Kennedy biography more fascinating. Just as biographical research is now bringing to light an unknown side of F. D. Roosevelt, so did Hamilton's efforts make Kennedy's reputation turn sharply.

Translations of *Reckless Youth* appeared around the world, even in China, and ABC television produced dramatized mini-series based on the book. However, possibly as a result of the book's success, the Kennedy family began a smear campaign against the biographer. Friends, ex-politicians and everyone who had ever been in contact with the former president were approached and enjoined not to speak with this horrible Nigel Hamilton. The Kennedy clan seemed to have lost none of its power by 1992.

With *JFK*, Hamilton proved not only that he was a good historian—a graduate of Trinity College, Cambridge—but also that he understood what journalism and public opinion meant. Thanks to contacts that his father, editor in chief at *The Times*, had, he had been given the opportunity to train as an intern in the editorial room of *The Washington Post*, while a student, and then on a television station in Canada. He had begun his work on Kennedy out of curiosity after writing a biography of Heinrich and Thomas Mann (*The Brothers Mann: The Lives of Heinrich and Thomas Mann, 1871-1950, 1875-1955*, appeared in 1978), and a trilogy, *Monty*, recording the life of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. He soon became rather intrigued with John F. Kennedy's self-representation. American historians had reproduced time and time again the story that Joseph Kennedy Sr. didn't believe in his son John as a politician and preferred to groom Joseph Jr. for the presidency, as a Democrat. Supposedly, it was only because his son Joseph died heroically in the Second World War that the torch was handed to John F. This myth, Hamilton was able to show, concealed a much more embarrassing story: one about the conservative and even anti-Semitic opinions of Joseph Sr. and Joseph Jr., neither one a democrat. At the end of the first volume of Hamilton's biography, John was not even 29 years old, but the biographer had already defined with precision how this far-right family could nevertheless enter history as 'democratic' and even produce a president who was known above all for his liberal and progressive views. The second volume of *JFK* would never appear.

In fact, Hamilton found himself confronted with the same problem years later. He was never able to complete his biography of Bill Clinton either. After publishing two volumes (in 2003 and 2007), he was hindered on all sides so effectively that he gave up trying to publish the third and final volume. In short, the same pattern emerged as after the appearance of *JFK*; under pressure from the Clintons, no one was willing to

speak to Hamilton. ‘Telling the real truth about people has never been easy. “Reputation, reputation, reputation! Oh, I have lost the immortal part of myself!” cries Cassio in *Othello*—and it is the fear about reputation that has led to countless reverses for biographers. Suetonius, author of *The Twelve Caesars*, was exiled from his beloved Rome.’¹ Hamilton was not exiled from his beloved America; after this debacle he even became a United States citizen.

Without exaggeration, Hamilton could be described as a missionary for biography. It was after writing a biography of Greenwich (co-authored with his mother, Olive Hamilton) that he published his double biography of Heinrich and Thomas Mann: a study of creative rivalry between siblings. After that, his three-volume biography of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery appeared in 1981, 1984 and 1987, winning the Whitbread Award for Biography. He also established a small publishing house called Biografia Publishers, as well as opening The Biography Bookshop in Covent Garden in London. Between 1988 and 1994, he lived in the United States, writing his *JFK* opus, and then returned to England to become professor in biography at De Montfort University, in Leicester. He also established the British Institute of Biography. However, people do not always listen to missionaries. The institute failed. Worse still, his efforts were openly hindered by the academic community; biography had not yet become sufficiently respectable. As a result Hamilton took refuge in America. This time for good. Since 2010, he has been an American citizen.

Hamilton continued to insist on the importance of biography. Along with his work on President Bill Clinton he published two successful books about the history and practice of biography: *Biography—A Brief History* in 2007 and *How To Do Biography: A Primer* in 2008. Written with the benefit of impressive personal knowledge of the field, they are two fine books on the history of biography, from the ancient world to the present day. It is worth noticing that in *Biography—A Brief History* he directs a few barbed and negative clichés at the French biography culture (‘Impelled by the public’s curiosity, which was at once voyeuristic and hungry for information—as well as by popular love of personal narratives and by academics’ growing distaste for ideology and French theorizing—biography was finally coming to age’²), at a time when he was invited, in 2015, to be the honorary President of La Société de Biographie. Meanwhile, he also published articles and reviews on biography in *The London Review of Books*, *The Boston Sunday Globe* and in *The New York Times*.

Hamilton’s biographies can be described as ‘corrections’. This is not intended to mean the mere rectification of a mistake. Biography as correction has to do instead with historical interpretations of the ‘big’ story, of institutional history.³ ‘The biographer, then, takes on a bold and rigorous challenge every time he or she attempts to record and interpret a real life—not only the challenge of research, but facing the reception of the work. The family of the third U.S. President, Thomas Jefferson, for centuries resisted with fury and disdain the notion that Jefferson had seduced his young slave, Sally

¹ Nigel Hamilton, *American Caesars: Lives of the US Presidents—from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010.

² Nigel Hamilton, *Biography—A Brief History*, Cambridge (Mass.) and London, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 241.

³ We have to find out what this has to do with the so-called ‘meta-narrative,’ a term discussed by Jean-François Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, reprint 1997.

Hemings, and had sired some seven children by her. Only recently, in 1998, was a DNA study able to expose the bigotry of denial that had underscored Southern racism, in the United States, for so long. Still today, biographers struggle against defamation and libel suits, are denied access to archives, refused copyright permission, in attempts by vested interests to thwart them. Were we to open the archives of publishers and authors, we would find them littered with the scars of battles fought—and often lost—in the struggle to tell the truth.⁴

The struggle to tell the truth sounds like an obvious one to undertake. Nevertheless, another programme is concealed within this ambition of Hamilton. Because in order to tell the truth it is first necessary to expose an untruth. The biographer necessarily is an independent narrator, but the subject of a biography can only be interpreted within a context. Biography, as Hamilton repeatedly makes clear, operates in that way as a corrective genre. This holds true in the case of his biography of Kennedy, his biography of Montgomery and particularly his biography of F. D. Roosevelt. A period in history is described from the perspective of a single participant. A human perspective intentionally replaces an objective view of events. One of the consequences of applying this method is that while the second part of Hamilton's *FDR at War* trilogy is a historical study, it is simultaneously a thoroughly entertaining story. In the dissertation edition of *Commander in Chief: FDR's Battle with Churchill, 1943* a theoretical foundation is provided for this method and therefore also the corrective ambition.⁵ 'Serious journalists, too, felt compelled to correct history and the work of historians. What was clear and impressive was that they were doing so in part by the use of biographical tools that historians had long eschewed as *infra dignitatem*: interviews.'⁶ In other words, Hamilton checks the personal story with regard to the broad context. He works in the tradition of narrative non-fiction. That entails the author of a work of narrative non-fiction showing that writing well is not only reserved for novelists, who make up a story. Every detail is based on research in primary sources, nothing is made up, but the structure of his story continuously helps to build suspense. Every situation described comes to life as a story told by someone who has the ability to excite the interest of the reader. The frequently repeated debate whether writing biography is an art or a science becomes, in this way, irrelevant. This kind of biography is produced by someone who understands that his careful research is just as important as the form it takes.

There is also another reason for calling Hamilton's views corrective. After he had published his three volumes on Montgomery in the 1980s, time progressed and according to the biographer a slight correction to his own work became necessary: 'what was acceptable to one generation became inadequate for the next.'⁷ One of the questions that might change from one generation to the next concerned Montgomery's possible homosexuality. 'Is it not time that the question of "gayness"—of affection and love, even passion for members of one's own sex—be reconsidered as a primary factor in

⁴ Nigel Hamilton, 'Biography as Corrective,' in *Commander in Chief: FDR's Battle with Churchill, 1943*, Groningen, Groningen University, 2016, p. 1-23, edited and republished in Hans Renders, Binne de Haan and Jonne Harmsma (eds.), *The Biographical Turn. Lives in History*, London and New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 15-30. The essay 'Biography as Corrective' is not published in the trademark edition of Nigel Hamilton, *Commander in Chief: FDR's Battle with Churchill, 1943*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

⁵ Nigel Hamilton, 'Biography as Corrective,' in *The Biographical Turn*, *op. cit.*, p. 15-30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷ Michael Carver, 'No Sex Please,' *The Guardian*, 22 September 2001.

military effectiveness in a democracy?’⁸ In 2001, then, Hamilton published *The Full Monty: Montgomery of Alamein 1887-1942*, simultaneously an abridged version of his three-volume biography of Montgomery and a new interpretation of the Field Marshal and his alleged homosexuality.

We could have known as early as 2010 that Hamilton would one day write a book about F. D. Roosevelt. He had published, after all, an exciting study on the genre of Presidential Biography, *American Caesars: Lives of the US Presidents—from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush*, not an inventorial summary of American presidents but a kind of group biography in which presidents like F. D. Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan are placed in order of merit. Bush Jr. ended at the bottom. The title *American Caesars* not only refers to Suetonius, who described the first twelve Roman emperors, but is also a definition of the presidency since 1941, when the Americans decided (under Roosevelt) to act as a world power and to assist the Europeans in their struggle against national-socialism and communism. In this impressive book, political history is explained (in part) on the basis of biography. The facts, for example, that Jacqueline Kennedy was not John F. Kennedy’s great love, that Nixon turned out to be a liar, and that Jimmy Carter, despite all of his good qualities, could not tolerate clever people in his circle, all influenced American history. Roosevelt is declared to have been the best president.

It is therefore not surprising that Hamilton has now produced a new, multi-volume work on this figure. Franklin D. Roosevelt, the 32nd President of the United States, from 1933 to 1945, was not the only one with ties to the Netherlands: his biographer has them too—as does the author of the present article. As is well known, the Roosevelts emigrated from Oud-Vossemeer, in Zeeland, to New Amsterdam, now New York, in the seventeenth century. For Hamilton’s connection with the history of the Netherlands, we don’t have to go so far back in time. Before his father, Denis Hamilton, became an important newspaperman on Fleet Street, he fought, in December 1944, as commanding officer of the infantry at the British bridgehead of the Waal in Nijmegen. In an attempt to recover the bridge over the Waal, the Germans attacked his battalion from Haalderen. Hamilton—whose earlier battalion had suffered 600 casualties in Normandy—was forced to fight a major defensive battle in which the battalion cooks were even ordered to take part. These wartime experiences have had a deep impact on the Hamilton family.

The leitmotiv in Hamilton’s *FDR* books is the Allies’ ideas about how best to liberate Europe from Nazi control during the Second World War. Is it then a biography? Does this not make it into a conventional study of American wartime activity in 1943 and 1944? The answer is that it is indeed a biography. Hamilton describes his working method as ‘slice biography.’ On the basis of important selected turning points in someone’s history, a portion of a life is shown in detail. Interpreting the life of an individual can serve to enhance our understanding of history. In that way, the biographical does not merely function as an illustration of a known story, but rather as a multiplier of interpretations of historical events and social structures.

Roosevelt sent American troops to Europe following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941. From that time on, the Americans were not only political and financial allies of the Europeans but military allies also. In fact, Hamilton offers a

⁸ *Ibid.*

profound and bold response to a question that had not been posed before: were the British the sound military strategists that they thought they were during the Second World War? Or do the Americans deserve that honour? Hamilton brilliantly shows that this question could very well be personalised: was it Churchill or Roosevelt who was pulling the strings?

The story was written on the basis of intensive archival research. Resting quietly in the archive of the University of York was the secret diary of the British ambassador to Washington, Lord Halifax. The diary of Roosevelt's niece, Daisy Suckley, only parts of which had previously been published, also came to light. Such documents cast a new light on the day-to-day political business of Washington, and also on the trans-Atlantic relationships during the war years as they have been described in many studies. Hamilton arrives at a number of surprising insights. The conventional picture of a Roosevelt who hardly concerned himself with military strategy during the Second World War is convincingly put aside, and the role of Churchill as a great statesman is qualified as well.

Hamilton's critical portrait of Churchill must be seen in the context of recent historical revisionism. In the years following the war, Churchill was virtually sainted. But over the time the halo was re-examined. Research was done on his many contradictions—on his indelicate eating habits, on the fact that he, as a politician, never made an effort to understand a budget, on his desire to become a Muslim. In another example the British historian Max Hastings has explained Churchill's disastrous role as Admiral and as Minister of the Navy in October 1914, when, out of sheer vanity and against the wishes of his superiors, he wanted to defend Antwerpen with a mere 200 sailors! The open Rolls Royce and the flowers had already been ordered so that he could enjoy a hero's welcome in the Flemish harbour city. The result of this folly was that the Germans decided to bomb the city, something that they did not originally intend to do.⁹

Churchill's courageous role as Prime Minister during the Second World War is, nevertheless, acknowledged by every historian. His decision never to negotiate with the Nazis was brave. In the study by the Anglo-American historian Felix Klos that appeared last year, the story of Churchill's dauntlessness immediately after he had taken office is clearly presented. Churchill became Prime Minister on the day Hitler began his invasion of Western Europe. While Churchill was still busy forming a government, a British-French High Command was set up. Klos writes vividly about the first days of Churchill's government. 'His private secretary came upon him lying in bed: He looked like a sweet piglet dressed in flannel.'¹⁰

During those frantic days of June 1940, the French government was in danger of losing power to a small group of politicians who wanted to negotiate with Hitler. The French fleet would fall into Hitler's hands, with all of the tragic consequences for Europe. With that threat hanging over his head, Churchill wanted to unite England and France under one government. The plan failed to become reality by a hair's breadth. It was a matter of hours. The minister representing France in London, Charles de Gaulle, who had just been appointed, sent a draft treaty to Paris: 'The two governments declare that France and Great Britain are no longer two nations, but a French-British union.' The sitting Prime Minister of France thought it a good idea but his cabinet was dead set

⁹ Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War*, Glasgow, William Collins, 2013, Chapter 14, *passim*.

¹⁰ Felix Klos, *Winston Churchill: Vader van Europa*, trans. from English by Ruud van der Helm and André Haacke, Amsterdam, Hollands Diep, 2016.

against it. Reynaud had to resign in favour of the collaborator Philippe Pétain. For the subsequent five years, ironically it was Hitler who set the agenda for the unification of Europe.

The fact that Churchill also made great errors of military judgment received less attention. Until now, that is: because in this slice-biography Hamilton dares to consider Churchill's role in the second half of the Second World War *from Roosevelt's point of view*, for the first time. And who is better equipped to do so than Hamilton?

In 1953, Churchill won the Nobel Prize for Literature with his six-volume war memoirs, but his version of the crucial events of 1943, when the allies began to win Europe back from the Nazis, is in dire need of correction. This became clear to Hamilton when he compared the material in the archives of the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King with Churchill's account. The standard account in historiography is that while Roosevelt might have been a capable politician, he had no understanding of military affairs and showed little interest in them.

Churchill was not the only one to contribute to colouring in this image of Roosevelt as commander-in-chief. Naval historian S. E. Morison did so too. Like Roosevelt, he was a Harvard alumnus and was given the role of embedded war historian. The result was the fifteen-volume *History of the United States Naval Operations in World War II*. His narrative was written on the basis of his direct experience in proximity to the battlefield. He heard there that the President was kept on the generals' leash. He did not appreciate the extent to which events were actually initiated politically by Roosevelt. And the generals enhanced their own image by minimizing the President's role. Roosevelt was unable to speak up for himself because he died in April 1945. After the war had ended, the ageing General Marshall insisted in his own biography, for example, that he sometimes didn't see the President for a month or six weeks, which was patently untrue, as the White House log demonstrates, leaving aside the fact that Roosevelt was the first President to take the field since Lincoln.

Foreign sources also repeatedly reinforced the picture that Roosevelt left military matters alone. In his diary Chinese nationalist Chiang Kai-shek for example sniggered at Roosevelt for being a 'small amateur in all military affairs.' Churchill's military right hand, Field Marshal Sir Alan Brooke, wrote that Roosevelt, unlike his own Prime Minister, 'had no military knowledge and was aware of this fact and consequently relied on Marshall and listened to Marshall's advice,'—ignoring the fact that Roosevelt had constantly had to overrule General Marshall, and in fact chose not to appoint him to command the D-Day invasion!

Hamilton's *FDR* project is a correction to history. He makes it clear that Roosevelt overruled his own generals, who recommended crossing the Channel from England to the continent first in 1942, then in 1943. President Roosevelt refused to authorize the invasion until his commanders and men were ready. By the end of 1943 he judged they were—but Churchill wasn't. The British Prime Minister wanted to liberate Europe by a strategy of 'closing the ring' around the Third Reich, rather than by a military operation that for almost a thousand years, since the time of William the Conqueror, had not been executed successfully.

According to Hamilton, this difference in insight, between invading Europe via the Channel when ready (according to Roosevelt's plan) or advancing on various fronts from southern Europe (according to Churchill's), was the difference between the Allies losing or winning the war. And it is even more spectacular that in this biography it becomes clear how Roosevelt used the atom bomb to decide the controversy with

Churchill to his advantage, by threatening to exclude England from the atom programme should Churchill continue to oppose the plans that were already in place for the D-Day invasion. Against this background of hard diplomatic confrontation, Roosevelt played for high stakes in his relation with his 'ally' Russia. Roosevelt's approaches to Stalin were as prudent and pragmatic as they were incomprehensible to Churchill.

Roosevelt thought about how the world would move forward after the war. Democracy would have to be propagated and colonialism would have to be abolished. The latter was not attractive to the British, least of all to Churchill. They had little interest in Roosevelt's post-war plans, which would mean the dismantling of the British Empire. In *The Mantle of Command* and *Commander in Chief* it is insightfully shown that Roosevelt's military strategy can be directly connected with the post-war establishment of the United Nations. The American notion of a right of self-determination for all people played an important role in this. Roosevelt had little desire to deploy the American forces for the liberation of Europe from the Nazi yoke only to see the European powers continue their colonial politics just as before the war.

Commander in Chief: FDR's Battle with Churchill, 1943 is a bold venture because it is focused on a single year and on a few people, in a decisive year. The reward of this venture, Hamilton wishes to show, is that Franklin D. Roosevelt should be recognized as an important *military* leader. Without his military leadership, the Wehrmacht could not have been defeated. Hamilton shows with this book that modern biography does not only take the character of a person as its starting point, but illuminates the role of that person in relation to history. And if said person is the President of the United States, that role may well be significant for the future of the world.

This notion of biography inspired Hamilton several years ago to launch an impassioned plea for the establishment of a Nobel Prize for biography. 'It is time, I earnestly believe, to reward that patient, global endeavour, not with money, but by a recognition of how important biography has become in our society—in fact, how bereft our society would be without it. My proposal is therefore this: that we found a Nobel Prize for Biography, open to biographers across the world.'¹¹

And why not? In funding the original Nobel Prizes, Alfred Nobel wished to reward those who confer the 'greatest benefit to mankind.' 'Biography has been conferring that benefit for two millennia. What better way to honour and inspire the seeking of the truth about real individuals across the continents than to create such a Nobel award for Biography? In an age of such great human potential, but also of such great danger from reckless individuals, what better way to show that truth *matters* – here, abroad, and across the globe?'¹²

Translated from the Dutch by Kate Eaton

¹¹ Nigel Hamilton, 'A Nobel Prize for Biography,' in Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2013, p. 351-354. First published in *NRC Handelsblad*, 24 April 2012, the same Dutch newspaper wherein Richard Holmes pleaded for a Nobel Prize for biography fifteen years earlier, see Richard Holmes, 'De biografie en de dood,' in *NRC Handelsblad*, 14 november 1997.

¹² Nigel Hamilton, 'A Nobel Prize for Biography,' in H. Renders and B. de Haan (eds.), *Theoretical Discussions of Biography*, op. cit.